

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Sea* (2005)**

John Banville

OVERVIEW

The novel tells the story of Max Morden, a middle-aged, Irish art critic who has returned to his childhood village after the death of his wife, Anna. The novel is in two sections and switches between times as the character and narrator of the story remembers different moments from his life with Anna and also childhood memories from the days he spent 50 years earlier at the old house known as the Cedars. A wealthy, middle-class family called the Graces rented the house when Max was a boy. He used to spend his summer days playing with the children of the house, Chloe and Myles. He even had a crush on Mrs. Grace and then on her daughter, Chloe. However, that summer spent with the Graces ended in tragedy and it is the trauma of this tragedy that Max calls to mind towards the ends of the novel as he struggles to deal with the aftermath of his wife's death.

STRUCTURE AND NARRATION

The Sea is John Banville's 14th novel. It is divided into two parts and it does not follow any regular chronological pattern. The plot of the story is revealed to us piecemeal as the narrator, Max Morden, remembers different moments from his life. The story, which Max narrates in the first person, has three main temporal settings. In the present we see Max staying at the Cedars with the Colonel and Mrs. Vavasour as he struggles to come to terms with the death of his wife. The second setting is the moments Max shared with his wife after she was given the news that she was dying of cancer. The third temporal setting is the summer 50 years earlier where Max spent his days with the Grace family at The Cedars. It was a coming-of-age experience for Max in more ways than one since he developed a crush for both Mrs. Grace and her daughter, had his first intimate experience with a girl, and also came face to face with death for the first time.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The Sea won the Man Booker Prize in 2005. The chair of the judging panel, Prof. John Sutherland, described the novel as "beautifully written and a masterly study of grief, memory and love recollected".

The title – *The Sea* – also has a central meaning for the structure of the novel. In many ways, Banville seems to be saying that our memory is a bit like the tides of the seas. Memories revisit us and they often can appear to be sent back to us through the workings of some higher power we can never completely understand. In the same way, the structure and time of the novel flows out and in rhythmically, bringing us back and forth between the present and the past as we stand on the shore of our time, reading the novel. Banville also employs aspects of the supernatural at times in the novel to connect the work of the classical gods (presumably the Greek gods) to the movements of the sea. Since Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, is also the mother of the muses who inspire artists, Banville sees a link between memory and storytelling. Also, if anyone drank from Mnemosyne, the river of memory, they would be able to hold up or curtail the passage of souls to the afterlife and also the process of reincarnation. Banville opens the novel with his character standing on the sea shore and this might be to suggest that Max has also returned to the seaside retreat of his childhood to see if he can in some way influence how his wife Anna passed on or is remembered.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Max Morden	Protagonist and narrator of the novel, a middle-aged Irish art critic who is mourning the death of his wife Anna
Anna Morden	Wife of Max
Claire Morden	Daughter of Max and Anna
Mis Vavasour/Rose	Housekeeper at the Cedars and governess of Chloe and Myles
Colonel Blunden	One of the regular tenants of the Cedars.

Connie Grace	Mother of Chloe and Myles
Carlo Grace	Husband of Connie and father of Chloe and Myles.
Chloe Grace	Connie's and Carlo's daughter
Myles Grace	'Mute' son of Connie and Carlo Grace

PLOT

Part I

Max, the narrator, has returned to the scene of his childhood Max has returned to the big house where he spent his childhood summers, a house called the Cedars, in the village of Ballyless near the town of Ballymore, Ireland. He recalls the summer the Grace family came to live at the house. Especially, his first encounter with the family as they drove up to the house all those years ago in a motor car. He is reacquainted with Rose, the governess from many years ago, who is now known as Miss Vavasour.

Flashback to the news of Anna's cancer A consultant named Mr. Todd (which sounds like the German word for death, *tod*) tells Anna that she does not have long to live. He tells her, however, that there are many promising treatments that she can undergo to fight the disease. The narrator tells us that the disease had caused her belly to become swollen. Anna wonders if people might she is pregnant.

Max and Anna feel embarrassed When they get home from the hospital, Max and Anna feel a terrible sense of embarrassment as they become panic-stricken about not knowing what to say to each other about this tragedy that has befallen them.

Flash forward to the present with Max at the Cedars The narrative returns us to the present and we realise that 'today' is precisely a year since the day Anna and Max had visited Mr. Todd for the first time. We also hear a little bit more about Colonel Blunden, who is also staying at the Cedars with Max.

Max has returned to the Cedars because of a dream The narrator then tells us that he has also returned to the Cedars because of a dream he had. In the dream, he was simply walking along a country road with the feeling that his foot was injured. When he woke from the dream, he thought of the Grace family and the Cedars for the first time in a long time. When he was a boy his mother and father and him used to rent a small chalet every summer near the Cedars.

Max recalls his crush on Mrs. Connie Grace Max remembers a day he was on the beach with the Grace family. Connie Grace was lying on the sand beside her husband Carlo Grace. Myles and Chloe, the children, were also sun bathing and changing out of their bathing costumes. The narrator, recalls that the three of them were aged 10 or 11. He develops a crush on Chloe as he watches her running and jumping on the beach.

Flash forward to the present – the narrator is writing a book on the artist Bonnard The narrator realises that the Cedars has retained nothing of the time 50 years ago when he stayed here with the Graces. He also tells us that he is working on a book on the artist Bonnard and reveals to us that he has become a bit of a hypochondriac since his wife received her diagnosis.

Max recalls the day his daughter Claire accompanied him to Ballyless after Anna died Claire, Max's daughter, writes to Max in the present asking how he is doing, and Max then recalls the day she accompanied him in the car on a trip to Ballyless. When they pass the deserted railway station and drive down Station Road, Max recalls the name of the big house – the Cedars. Claire wonders why Max drives past everything and is unwilling to stop at any of the places he used to know as a child in Ballyless. He feels that if he stops he will dissolve in a "puddle of tears".

Max and Claire have an argument and Max has an epiphany Claire tells Max that he lives in the past, and Max realises she is speaking the truth. He also accepts that all he really wants in life is to be "concealed, protected, guarded" and that is why he retreats so often into the past. Claire starts crying and tells her father that he is not the only one who is suffering. We learn that Claire has given up art history to help "backward children" from the "slums". Claire leaves Max on his own and tells him she will meet him in the car. When Max comes back to the car Claire will not let him drive as he is drunk. They argue and Claire tells Max that he drove her boyfriend Jerome away. When they get back

to their old house, Max phones Mrs. Vavasour in the Cedars to tell her that he wants to rent one of the rooms.

Flash forward to the present: Max enjoys the silence of the sea at the Cedars We flash forward to the present, where Max is thinking about the special kind of silence he enjoys living near the sea at the Cedars. He compares the sensation this silence gives him to the silence he experienced in the sickrooms of his childhood.

He recalls the times, 50 years ago, when lying in his bed in the chalet he would dream of rescuing Mrs. Grace Max recalls how he used to make up little dramas in which he would rescue Mrs. Grace from great catastrophes as he lay in his bed in the big house. He then recalls the first time he spoke to Chloe at the Strand shop. He discovers that Myles and Chloe are twins and that Myles has been mute since birth. On being invited back to the house, Max is greeted by Mrs. Grace in the hall. He finds the moment with Mrs. Grace wholly intoxicating. He is introduced to Mr. Grace and also meets Rose, the housemaid.

Flash forward to the present and the narrator has an epiphany about what adulthood had meant to him as a child He recalls that as a child he had presumed adulthood would be a state of tranquillity as he would have left the “raw immediacy” of childhood behind and that all mysteries would be settled and that time would flow by almost unnoticed. He realises that what he had imagined for the future was only what could be described as an “imagined past”. He realises that in his grieving state he has started to run past, present and future together.

Max remembers how Anna and he would escape to the past Max recalls how, after Anna’s diagnosis, they sought escape from the “intolerable present” in reliving moments from their past. They went back over their earliest moments together such as getting married in London. He remembers Anna’s father, Charlie, a crook and an art collector. He remembers that it was Anna who had asked him to marry her.

Max recalls a picnic and the end of his crush on Mrs. Connie Grace They go in the motor car on an outing for a picnic. Max joins the Graces in the car and Rose cycles to the location. Chloe throws pieces of chewed bread at Max and Mrs. Grace calls her disgusting. Chloe goes away to sulk. Max then experiences a heightened moment of infatuation for Mrs. Grace as she is lying in the grass. However, once she has fallen asleep on the grass and Max becomes aware of her presence in all its physicality, he experiences a sense of resentment and even disgust. It is the end of his infatuation for Mrs. Grace and the beginning of his crush on Chloe. In recollecting those childhood feelings for someone who has now passed on, the narrator, in the present, reflects on how “we carry the dead with us until we die”, until we, too, are borne along by our bearers until they, too, pass on into the “unimaginable generations”.

Max experiences a vision about the sea He imagines the waves speaking to him with some kind of human voice. They tell of some ancient catastrophe such as the sack of Troy. The narrator seems to be implying that all seas and tides bring with them the sound of distant tragedy.

Part 2

Max tries to remember when his feelings for Chloe changed Max tries to recall the exact moment when he transferred his feelings from Chloe’s mother to Chloe. He cannot find a distinct moment. He does recall the moment when he felt Chloe’s feelings towards him change. He had swum about 200 yards between two large bollards near the shore. And when he got out of the water, he found Chloe waiting for him, shivering, on the shore.

Max and Chloe kiss for the first time Max and Chloe kiss for the first time while watching a movie at Mr. Rickett’s Old Picture House near the Coast Road. They are sitting in the pitch dark when the light from the projector suddenly went out. In the darkness they kissed. The narrator then has an epiphany about youth and the happiness of youth. He says it was so much then about “accumulation, of taking things – new experiences, new emotions – applying them like so many polished tiles to the finished pavilion of the self”.

The narrator’s thoughts move to his arrival at the Cedars and the last months of his wife Max recalls how delighted Miss Vavasour was to welcome him to the Cedars. He also feels Colonel Blunden does not like him. As he reflects on the soothing qualities of the sea near the house, he recalls how Anna used to like to take baths. He then remembers her in the nursing home when she

was very ill. She said to him that he was not even “allowed to hate [her] a little any more... like you used to”. She tells him that a little bit of hate is necessary for love.

Max feels his memory of the house dissolve when he returns As Miss Vavasour shows him to his room, Max notes how little is as he had remembered it. He panics as he feels that something precious – his memory of this special place – was being robbed from him as the real, present condition of the house began to take the place of his imagined recollection of it.

Max falls for Chloe and withstands her cruelties Max feels he has fallen in love with her. However, in looking back on the romance, he asks himself why he had put up with her minor cruelties and the “enraptured humiliations”. He realised that he would always be the one worshipping at her shrine. He remembers a moment she entered the room and when he went over to embrace her, how she had slapped him across the face. He reflects on the moments of uncertainty with her as the origin of his self-consciousness.

Anna starts taking photographs of the maimed in her hospital The hospital telephones Max to tell him that Anna has been wandering the wards of the hospital taking photographs of the patients. Max sees the photos, which are colour shots of what might be found in a field hospital during wartime. She tells Max that the photos are her “indictment” of “everything”.

A terrible storm at the Cedars and Max has an epiphany Back in the present, Max awakes to a terrible storm at the Cedars. It reminds him of a sense he has had for most of his days that his life has been simply a rehearsal for a grand transfiguration of some kind. He describes it as him awaiting a moment of “earthly expression”.

Miss Vavasour’s friend arrives at the Cedars and Max recalls bringing Anna to his mother’s flat Miss Vavasour’s friend arrives to stay and during dinner she is far too overblown in her words of consolation to Max. It results in an almighty row between her and Miss Vavasour. We then move back again to a time when Anna went with Max to visit Max’s mother, who lived in a flat by the canal with her cats. She is a little unfriendly to Anna but weeps when Max leaves her. She was to die later that winter.

Max realises that Anna allowed him to be the person he wanted to be Max realises that he is beginning to forget the image he has inside of Anna. He realises that he found in Anna a way to fulfil a fantasy of himself. He felt he had never had a personality the way other people did. He feels that Anna was the person who enabled him to discover his personality. She would say to him “Why not be yourself?”

Rose is in love with Mr Grace One day Max climbs a tree and watches as Carlo Grace drives away to the town with Chloe and Myles. He also sees Rose weeping under a tree. Mrs. Grace sees her and goes out to discover what is the matter. Rose confesses. The narrator discovers that Rose is in love with Mr. Carlo Grace. Max tells Chloe and on day when the three of them – Max, Chloe and Myles – are on the beach staring out to sea, Chloe tells Max that she hates Rose.

Max remembers the final moments with Anna Max describes his painful last moments with Anna. At the end, she grabs his arm and says “They are stopping the clocks” and “I have stopped time”.

Rose catches Chloe and Max kissing in the house One day while at the beach, Chloe and Max find a hideaway. Chloe takes off her swimming costume and they embrace and kiss. When Rose finds them, Chloe puts on her costume and rushes past Rose. Rose calls her back but she does not come. Later, they are both seen shouting at each other on the beach. Chloe walks to edge of the waves and Myles come to sit beside her and comfort her.

Chloe and Myles wade out into the sea and are drowned Chloe and Myles then beginning wading out to sea, watched by Rose and Max. They were so far out they disappear. Max is only 10 or 11 and he does not know what to do. He sees some splashing far out, and a man starts shouting for the guards. Then a younger man tries to swim out and find them, but it is too late. Max runs down the Station Road to the house to tell the Graces. They stand together in shock. Reflecting back on the tragic scene, the narrator feels a sense of awe at having known two young living creatures who were now “astoundingly dead”.

Max is back in the present talking to Anna, asking why she hasn't come back to haunt him Max stands in the old house in the silence, listening to the sea and asking Anna why she has not come back to haunt him. He says he has heard this silence in the background ever since Mr. Todd gave Anna her diagnosis.

Max gets drunk and almost drowns After the Colonel's daughter and children fail to show up at the house for a reunion that the Colonel has been heartily looking forward to, Max goes to the local pub and gets drunk. He is found the next morning by the Colonel lying unconscious on the beach. Max recalls standing in the waves contemplating wading out to sea. He had been fortunate that he had collapsed where the tide was going out. When he comes to, a young man is leaning over him telling him he had alcohol poisoning. The young man is Jerome, the boyfriend of his daughter Claire. He discovers they are engaged to be married.

Max leaves the Cedars and goes to live with Claire and Jerome Claire persuades Max to leave the Cedars. As Max is saying goodbye to Miss Vavasour, he thinks about asking her if she blames herself for the deaths of Chloe and Myles. He thinks better of it. Rose does reveal to him that it had always been Chloe and not Carlo that she was more fond of. The Colonel gives Max a fountain pen as a parting gift and the narrator tells us he is using this pen to write the story.

Max recalls a memory within a memory He is back outside the nursing home where Anna is staying. He has just stepped out for some fresh air. We learn that Anna dies when he is outside. But while he is there, staring into the sea, he recalls another moment from the holiday with Chloe and Myles where he had gone swimming on his own. He is standing in the water up to his waist, when all of a sudden, a force from beneath the waves lifts him up and carries him further in to the shore.

THEMES

Memory Memory is a major motivating force in the novel. In fact, the whole story is revealed to us through memories of different times. As the narrator admits, and as his daughter says of him, he lives in the past. But the narrator also wants to remind the reader numerous times in the novel that it is the gap between reality and how we remember things that causes us the most surprise. For example, Max finds it disorientating when he returns to the Cedars and sees that everything in the house, even its dimensions, seem all wrong, or at least completely different to how he had remembered them. However, even though he recognises this disparity between memory and reality, he still spends the entire novel reflecting on different memories from his past.

There is also a suggestion that the sea becomes a symbol for how memory encompasses us in our lives. At the end of the novel, as Max recalls a moment from the day when his wife died, he is also then sent back further to another day, spent with Chloe and Myles where he had gone off to play on his own. However, in order to strengthen the connection between the work of memory and the work of the sea, the narrator immediately shifts to a memory of a moment, when the sea literally lifted him up and transported him backwards. Perhaps Banville is telling us that memory works a little bit like the sea and that both can drown us if we give up too much of our lives to them.

Class Socio-economic class is also a powerful theme in the story. Max is conscious, as he reflects on different times in his life, of how class played an important role in how he acted and in how he acted with different people. For example, when he is staying in the flimsy chalet near the Cedars and starts mixing with Chloe and Myles, he is conscious of the fact that it was some achievement for him to be socialising with them. It was one of the reasons why he is very much the 'worshipper' in the relationship between himself and Chloe. Later on in the novel, Max also reflects on the days when his father left him and his mother. He recalls the years he spent living in rented flats and almost congratulates himself on the fact that he is now living a very different kind of life at the Cedars. Lastly, when he brings Anna to meet his mother, he is all the time conscious of the fact that Anna comes from a very different class to him. Anna's father was very wealthy and has a huge art collection. Max's mother lives in a flat and is described in a way that is somewhat stereotypical of working-class people. Max is always conscious of these differences throughout the novel and it affects how he acts with others and also might be regarded as leading him to be somewhat dismissive of certain people that he meets in the course of the story.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Max

Max is a retired art critic who is trying to finish a book on the French artist Pierre Bonnard. His wife has recently died and he has moved to the Cedars as he wants to sell the house he lived in with Anna. One summer, he meets the Grace family while on holiday and he never truly recovers from the events of that tragic summer. He is a man who lives in the past and also a man who finds it difficult to open up to others.

Pensive Max is described by his daughter as someone who lives in the past. As he reflects on his daughter's words, he comes to realise his daughter is right. In some sense, Max tries to work out why he is living in the past throughout the novel by returning to the events that led to the two most dramatic events of his life – the death of Chloe and Myles when he was an 11-year-old boy and the death of his wife about a year ago. The entire plot of the novel is revealed to us through a series of recollections that flit back and forth between the different times of the novel.

Anxious Max is obviously traumatised and haunted by the drownings of Chloe and Myles. Chloe was his first love and he watched from the beach as she walked into the sea and drowned. It is hard to imagine how any boy would cope with such a tragedy. Max has obviously not come to terms with this event throughout his life. It is only when his wife dies 50 years later that he feels he can immerse himself in the different memories from these moments – the life with Chloe and the life with Anna – in order to try to make some sense of it all. He devotes himself to the work of memory in an attempt to understand more about the events. In the end, the process is helpful as it allows the narrator – Max – to come up with an elaborate comparison between the sea and memory itself. In writing about this comparison, he is able to use art and writing to come to a fuller understanding of these traumatic events in his life.

Self-obsessed Max is self-obsessed and for this reason he fails to understand why people close to him have acted certain ways. For example, he is very dismissive of Claire's boyfriend and he is unwilling to accept him as a son-in-law. The reader feels that if he took the time to listen to his daughter about why she gave up art history for the education of "backward" children from the "slums", he would have a better understanding of her intentions. He also misunderstands the intentions of Rose, the governess of Chloe and Myles. He believes that Rose is besotted by Carlo Grace as he sees her weeping when Carlo leaves and believes they are having an affair. However, it is only very late in the novel that Rose tells him that she had always been much closer to Chloe than she was to Carlo. Once again, if he had taken the time to get to know Rose, he might have understood better why she acted as she did.

Chloe

Chloe is the daughter of Carlo and Connie Grace. She is the 11-year-old twin of Myles who cannot speak. She is a strong-willed and independent girl, who is also very sensitive and very much the leader in the relationship with Max.

Strong-willed We only know Chloe briefly in the novel, but of all the characters she is perhaps the one who has had the biggest influence on the narrator. As the novel is told completely from the perspective of the narrator, there is no other character that we feel we get to know very well. For example, Chloe draws Max to her when they kiss in the room near the beach on the day when Rose finds them. And she remains in the driving seat in the relationship with Max. Max admits to being the one who is worshipping at the "shrine" of Chloe. Also, it must take incredible willpower to walk into the sea at the age of 11 after having experienced something upsetting. She does that after an argument with Rose on the beach and she never seems to look back. Despite her age, she shows incredible willpower.

Sensitive Chloe is also a sensitive person. It is possible that she has detected that Max has a crush on her mother. She therefore tries to distract him by playing with him and teasing him. In the end it works and he falls for her. She is also sensitive in how she seems to have worked out what kind of person he is. One day, when Max had gone off to swim on his own and was going back and forth between two bollards set in the sea, she waited, shivering, on the beach until he was finished only so she could tell him that it was not necessary to show off. Her affections were not to be gained in this way. She seemed to be telling him that she already had feelings for him.